## DUCKS AND GEESE

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In 1988 we were just learning about CRP and its potential to improve production of ducks and other wildlife. Waterfowl managers were still fighting to produce ducks on a landscape handcuffed by fencerow to fencerow plowing.

Duck recruitment was low, and nest success rates were not high enough to maintain duck populations. Fragmented nesting cover and abundant predator populations, especially red fox, resulted in nest success rates that were often well below 10 percent. In addition, millions of nesting hens were lost to predation.

In 1988 we were in the throes of drought, with the worst to come. The wetland index, derived from our spring breeding duck survey, was seventh lowest on record, and in 1990 the index would reach a record low.

Because it was still very dry, we had not yet learned that a North Dakota landscape, with abundant large blocks of CRP nesting cover and record high wetland conditions, could produce a substantial portion of North America's annual duck crop.

Water returned in summer 1993. Prairie potholes flooded to levels not seen since European settlement of the Dakotas. These exceptional water conditions prevailed for a record 14 years. This year, prairie potholes are again drying. The May 2008 water index was the 10th lowest on record; this following 2007, which had the 49th highest water index in our 60-year survey history. Drying is a good thing for prairie potholes, making them even more productive for ducks and other wildlife when water returns.

The 2008 spring breeding duck index was more than 3.4 million birds, 60 percent above the 1948-2007 average and the 13th highest on record. Our report, however, cautions that these high duck numbers do not indicate a high breeding effort. Because of very dry conditions, many ducks moved out of the state shortly after the survey or simply abandoned breeding efforts for the year.

The 1988 breeding duck index was 1.8 million birds, which was about 12 percent above the long-term average at the time, but only about one-third of the number of ducks in 2002, a record year.

The 2008 index for mallards is about 152 percent above that of 1988, but just half of the record number of mallards in 2001. Despite a significant drop in continental scaup numbers over time, the number of scaup tallied in North Dakota's spring breeding duck survey has increased from 175,380 birds in 1988 to 434,264 in 2008. Reasons for the increase are not clear, and we know that only a small portion of the scaup tallied actually breed in North Dakota.

In 1988, the restoration of giant Canada geese in North Dakota was still underway. Nesting Canada geese were established across much of the state, but it was unclear whether we could maintain a huntable population without continued extraordinary efforts.

The 1988 Canada goose index from the spring U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey was 18,000 birds. The 2008 Canada goose index is not yet available, but the 2007 index was a whopping 362,800 geese. These birds have provided a huge hunting resource for waterfowlers in North Dakota and the Central Flyway, but have also caused problems.

With all these changes in habitat and populations, what happened to harvest regulations, hunting activity and harvest during the past 20 years? In 1988, data indicated that we had 31,064 waterfowl hunters, of which 26,841 were residents and 4,223 nonresidents. This was during the drought and the restrictive waterfowl seasons that accompanied it.

After water returned to North Dakota's prairies, on top of a CRP-benefited landscape, duck populations boomed. Resident waterfowl hunter numbers peaked at 39,118 in 1999 and nonresident numbers peaked at 30,029 in 2001. In 2007, preliminary estimates indicate we fielded 25,549 resident and 22,857 nonresident hunters.

The 1988 duck season was very restrictive in terms of length of season and daily bag limit. The 2007 duck season regulations were considerably more liberal.

Another major change in waterfowl and migratory game bird management has been the implementation of the Harvest Information Program survey. This program requires state wildlife agencies to register all migratory bird hunters. The registration process collects names and addresses of all migratory bird hunters as well as hunting activity information.

HIP data provides an accurate measure of waterfowl harvest and all the other migratory game birds currently hunted. The harvest data, along with population data from a wide variety of surveys, is necessary for appropriate management of these resources.

In addition to regular waterfowl season hunting opportunities, a special youth waterfowl hunting season was implemented in 1996. Another special hunting season established in 1999 is the September Canada goose hunting season.


*Waterfowl hunters must remember to register with the Harvest Information Program before going into the field.*